

**Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing “Examining HHS’s Public Health Preparedness for and
Response to the 2017 Hurricane Season”
October 24, 2017**

(As prepared for delivery)

Thank you, Mr. Vice Chairman, for holding this important hearing. I too want to express my deepest sympathy for those impacted by these storms, particularly our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. This committee stands ready to assist in whatever way we can.

Today we are examining the Department of Health and Human Services’ continuing efforts to protect the public health in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the aftermath of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria.

This is the first in a series of hearings on the preparedness for and response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria. In the coming weeks, we will also hold hearings before the Energy and Environment Subcommittees. And, as the Vice Chairman stated, this committee will be conducting oversight of the rebuilding of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands for years to come.

The public health risks typically associated with natural disasters are varied and include heightened incidences of infectious diseases, diminished access to medical care, and long-term mental health trauma, just to name a few concerns. These risks can be particularly dangerous for vulnerable populations such as infants, dialysis patients, individuals who may be immunosuppressed, and the elderly.

Tragically we saw this in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma where 14 elderly residents of the Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills in

Florida lost their lives as a result of heat-induced health issues after the facility's air conditioning system failed during the storm. Last week, the committee sent a bipartisan letter to the nursing home's owner requesting information on the facility's emergency preparedness plan, inspection history, and the steps it took to protect residents after its air conditioning system stopped working.

We will hear today that while the three major Hurricanes to impact the United States in 2017 – Harvey, Irma, and Maria – were distinct events that presented, and continue to present, their own unique challenges, many of the protocols that are necessary to conduct an effective public health response are immutable. For example, federal agencies responding to disasters must communicate effectively with each other and with local, state, and territorial officials to identify any areas of need. Ensuring that individuals have adequate access to basic necessities such as food, water, and medical supplies is critical in any public health protection effort.

As we head into a recovery phase, it is important that we also carefully monitor patients as they transition from hospitals or under medical supervision back to their homes or other long-term living arrangements. News reports indicate over 60 percent of Puerto Ricans are now homeless as a result of the devastating hurricanes. We need to make sure when patients are discharged from the hospitals they have safe places to go and don't end up back at the hospital.

However, following Hurricane Maria, various media reports have called into question whether the federal government is adequately meeting its obligation to protect the health and welfare of American citizens in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. On this matter, I am eager to gain the perspective of our witnesses who have been on the ground in the areas that have been affected by the most recent hurricanes.

Making sure that Americans in need get the assistance they require, cannot and should not be a partisan matter. If certain agencies are not

pulling their weight, we want to know; if there are federal laws or policies that are impeding the recovery efforts, we want to know that as well. In addition, we also want to hear about any best practices that can be gleaned from the ongoing recovery efforts that can be utilized in the response to any future natural disasters.